

# When it comes streetcars, Mayor Tom Barrett says he won't back down

By [Bill Glauber](#) of the Journal Sentinel  
Nov. 25, 2014 4:00 a.m.

"We are not talking about a Streetcar Named Desire," Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett said Monday afternoon as he laid out the case for a proposed downtown Milwaukee streetcar line.

Slowed by the Public Service Commission and derided by talk radio, Barrett isn't backing down from his signature project.

In fact, he's doubling down.

"The others say do nothing, do nothing," Barrett said. "I reject that."

Last week, Barrett announced a plan to move the streetcar project forward, with construction beginning late next year for an opening in 2018.

The total cost of the project: \$123.9 million.

To pay for it, Barrett will ask the Common Council to create two tax incremental financing districts to provide an estimated \$49.3 million in public funding. He'll also attempt to get a \$10 million outlay in new federal funds.

The new cash is on top of \$64.6 million already allocated — \$54.9 million in federal aid and \$9.7 million from an existing tax incremental financing district.

Barrett's new plan tackles two issues: extending the starter 2.1-mile system to the lakefront and coming up with the cash to pay for relocating utility lines.

A 0.4-mile extension would enable the system to circle the proposed Couture development.

In April, the Public Service Commission ruled the city must pay for the utility relocation, estimated at \$22.7 million. The city has filed a lawsuit to reverse that decision.

Barrett said the project will connect new business development, tie together amenities and allow people to move seamlessly downtown. He said the streetcar is part of a "comprehensive, 21st century transportation policy," that includes cars, parking, buses and bicycles.

Sitting in his office, Barrett pointed to a map that showed more than \$2.6 billion in public and private investment downtown since 2004, with more than \$2 billion of additional development either under construction or in the planning stages.

He also referenced a report [showing well-educated adults 25 to 34 are moving into cities](#). In the

Milwaukee-Waukesha-West Allis census area, 12,614 college-educated, 25- to 34-year-olds lived in close-in neighborhoods in the city, up from 9,557 in 2000.

Since 2005, Milwaukee's close-in neighborhoods have seen an expansion of 6,300 housing units.

Barrett zeroed in on other cities on the list of the so-called "Young and Restless," including Denver, Seattle, Minneapolis and Portland.

"They've got a 21st century mass transit system in the heart of the city and they are attracting young talented educated people that are allowing those communities to move forward by leaps and bounds," Barrett said. "We're on the cusp of this."

Barrett said he is well aware there are critics of the project.

"I realize this is red meat for conservative talk radio but think of the listenership in conservative talk radio, it's by and large outside the city, by and large people who are listening to it in their car," he said.

There are some who have expressed concerns that the route is too small and doesn't go far enough, Barrett said.

"Then you've got others who say this is a Trojan horse, 'all he wants to do is get this started and expand it,'" Barrett said. "And my response is, I want to get this started, I want to expand it."

"I want to expand it through the Third Ward toward the airport," Barrett said. "I want to expand it to Bronzeville. I want to extend it to UWM (University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee). I want to expand it past Marquette because we've got all of these young people. And I want people who are living the urban experience to be able to move around in the heart of the city."

## **Critics seek to halt project**

Others want to stop the streetcar before the first track is laid.

Ald. Bob Donovan, a candidate for mayor in 2016, [announced plans Monday to launch a petition](#) drive early next year for a binding referendum on borrowing for the streetcar.

Donovan said his petition drive can't begin until the council takes action on Barrett's proposal and that he'll need more than 20,500 signatures to force the referendum.

He said he wants the citizens of Milwaukee to have an up or down vote on the project.

"It was a bad idea to begin with and it has not gotten better with age," Donovan said of the project.

Common Council President Michael Murphy, who voted against the streetcar project in 2011, said he wants to take a close look at Barrett's proposal.

"I'm a big believer that you should weigh all the evidence before you make a final decision," Murphy said. "I certainly am very concerned about cost."

The Southeastern Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission has said total operating and maintenance costs are projected at \$2.4 million annually with three streetcars operating at peak hours.

During the first 18 months of operation, the majority of costs would be covered by federal funds from the

Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality Improvement Program (CMAQ), Barrett said. Another portion of costs would be covered by farebox revenues of \$1 a ride, estimated to yield \$588,000 a year, and corporate sponsorships of \$250,000 annually, Barrett said.

Barrett anticipated the city would ask for an 18-month renewal of the federal grant.

Asked if the city was trying to do too much, Barrett said no. He also said he would not be dissuaded by critics from outside the city, including those in the Legislature.

Last week, after Barrett announced his new streetcar funding proposal, Assembly Majority Leader Jim Steineke (R-Kaukauna) tweeted: "Mayor Barrett, if you have \$120 mil to pay for a 1900's style trolley, you certainly don't need state tax \$ for a #Bucks arena."

"My message is, we've got a lot of momentum going in downtown Milwaukee," Barrett said. "Let's keep the momentum going."

*Journal Sentinel reporter Don Behm contributed to this story.*

**Find this article at:**

<http://www.jsonline.com/news/milwaukee/when-it-comes-streetcars-mayor-tom-barrett-says-he-wont-back-down-b99396873z1-283764651.html>

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.